

Message Text

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12

ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /026 W

----- 015908

R 070109Z NOV 74

FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6806

INFO AMEMBASSY TOKYO

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 SEOUL 7399

EXDIS

TOKYO PASS TO PRE-ADVANCE TEAM

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, PDEV, KS, JA, KN

SUBJECT: APPRAISAL OF KOREA

1. INTRODUCTION

THE EMBASSY HAS REPORTED FULLY ON BOTH THE INTERNAL PROBLEMS FACING KOREA AND OUR OPERATIONAL ISSUES HERE. IN THIS TELEGRAM, WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE EMBASSY SENIOR STAFF, I HAVE SOUGHT TO SET DOWN MY OWN INITIAL IMPRESSIONS AND TO PLACE CURRENT KOREAN DEVELOPMENTS IN A BROADER PERSPECTIVE.

2. EMBASSY WILL SHORTLY SUBMIT AS FOLLOW-UP A SEPARATE TELEGRAM FLOWING FROM THIS ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDING POSITIONS WE FEEL SHOULD BE STRESSED DURING PRESIDENT FORD'S VISIT.

3. STATE OF THE NATION: SUCCESS AND INSECURITY THE PATTERN OF SUCCESS:

ANY ASSESSMENT OF SOUTH KOREA TODAY MUST START WITH RECORDING ITS RELATIVE STRENGTH AND STABILITY, THE VIBRANCY AND DYNAMISM OF ITS SOCIETY, AND THE ESSENTIAL MOOD OF OPTIMISM STILL PERVASIVE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. THE PAST DECADE HAS INDEED BEEN A TRIUMPH FOR SOUTH KOREA OVER ITS HOSTILE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT.

4. THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF ROK SUCCESS EMBRACE, PRINCIPALI:

A. HIGH ECONOMIC GROWTH AND BROAD MATERIAL BENEFITS TRANSFORMING

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THE COUNTRY AND OVERCOMING NATURAL RESOURCE DEFICIENCY WITH THE

DEVELOPMENT OF A HIGHLY SKILLED, DEDICATED TECHNOCRACY AND LABOR FORCE.

B. DEVELOPMENT OF AN EFFECTIVE MILITARY FORCE CAPABLE OF DEALING WITH NORTH KOREAN LAND ATTACK AND REQUIRING MAINLY U.S. AIR AND NAVAL SUPPORT AND EXTERNAL RESUPPLY.

C. A FOREIGN POLICY ADAPTED TO DETENTE, ACCEPTING NORTH/SOUTH TALKS, A TWO-KOREA POLICY, AND A FLEXIBLE UN STANCE.

D. EFFECTIVE AND HIGHLY INTELLIGENT LEADERSHIP, A HIGH DEGREE OF DISCIPLINE AND AUSTERITY, A BROAD EDUCATIONAL EFFORT AND MASSIVE INPUTS OF FOREIGN CAPITAL.

E. IN SUM, KOREA HAS SUCCEEDED BY THE DINT OF HIGHLY EFFICIENT USE OF ITS SCARCE RESOURCES.

5. BUT, KOREA'S DECADE-PLUS OF SUCCESS HAS MESMERIZED MANY TO IGNORE ITS ENDEMIC PROBLEMS, AND THE BRASHNESS AND BLUSTER OF THE KOREANS HAVE SERVED TO HIDE AN UNDERLYING SENSE OF INSECURITY AND LACK OF CONFIDENT SELF-ASSURANCE. THE ROOTS OF SOUTH KOREA'S PROBLEMS AND INSECURITY ARE OF COURSE HISTORIC AND GEOGRAPHIC. IT WAS AND REMAINS A VULNERABLE NATION WITH A MARGINAL ECONOMY.

6. THE CURRENT SOURCES OF CONCERN TO THE ROK FALL INTO TWO BROAD CATEGORIES - EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL.

7. EXTERNAL FACTORS

A. NORTH KOREA - COMPETITOR AND THREAT: THE KOREAN SENSE OF INSECURITY IS IN PARTICULAR RELATED TO THE SITUATION IN THIS PENINSULA. WHILE IN OUR VIEW THE LIKELIHOOD OF RENEWED NORTH KOREAN AGGRESSION IS NOT GREAT, THE ROK PERCEPTION OF THIS THREAT, BASED ON CONSTANT SURVEILLANCE OF NORTH KOREA'S GROWING MILITARY CAPABILITIES AND THE KNOWLEDGE THAT SEOUL IS ALREADY ALMOST WITHIN ARTILLERY RANGE IS FAR KEENER. MOREOVER, THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT THE ROK IS WINNING THE STRUGGLE FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ADVANCEMENT WITH THE DPRK, A STRUGGLE IN WHICH THE LATTER - AT LEAST AS FAR AS CAN BE PERCEIVED FROM SEOUL - DOES NOT HAVE TO DEAL WITH INTERNAL POLITICAL STRAINS OR EXTERNAL CRITICISM AND MAY BE BETTER INSULATED THAN THE ROKG AGAINST THE EFFECTS OF
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INTERNATIONAL INFLATION AND THE ENERGY CRISIS. THE ADAPTATION TO DETENTE HAS ALSO BEEN DISCOMFITTING IN MANY RESPECTS AND HAS SOWN NEW SEEDS OF UNCERTAINTY WITHIN THE ROK. THERE IS NO CONFIDENCE IN THE EFFICACY OF THE NORTH/SOUTH TALKS OR ANY OTHER MEANS OF BRINGING ABOUT AN ACCOMMODATION WITH PYONGYANG. THERE IS A SENSE OF DISILLUSIONMENT WITH THE EROSION OF THE ROK'S POSITION IN THE UN AND GROWING CONCERN OVER THE DPRK'S GAINS IN THE CONTEST FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION, IN PARTICULAR THE TREND TOWARD

RECOGNITION OF THE DPRK BY KOREA'S FORMER ALLIES IN THE WEST WITH NO COMMENSURATE MOVES IN SEOUL'S DIRECTION BY COMMUNIST STATES. EVEN MORE UNSETTLING IS A GROWING APPREHENSION THAT KOREA'S INTERESTS WILL SOME DAY BE SACRIFICED AT THE ALTAR OF DETENTE AND THE DPRK ENCOURAGED BY ITS DIPLOMATIC SUCCESSES TO RENEW AGGRESSION.

B. THE ROLE OF THE MAJOR POWERS: DESPITE THEIR MAJOR DEFENSE EFFORT, KOREANS STILL SEE THEIR FATE LYING IN THE HANDS OF FOUR GREAT POWERS, NONE OF WHICH THE ROK FULLY TRUSTS:

(1) THE SOVIET UNION AND THE PRC REMAIN ESSENTIALLY HOSTILE FORCES AND KOREANS HAVE NO STRATEGY OF EXPLOITING SINO/SOVIET RIVALRY TO BRING A MORE STABLE SECURITY STRUCTURE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA.

(2) JAPAN IS STILL EYED WITH GREAT SUSPICION AND CONSIDERED OF DOUBTFUL DEPENDABILITY. PARADOXICALLY, KOREANS RECOGNIZE THE MAJOR ROLE JAPAN MUST PLAY IN THEIR SECURITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, BUT THE GREATER THE JAPANESE ASSISTANCE TO KOREA, THE GREATER THE FEAR OF JAPANESE DOMINATION THROUGH THE ECONOMIC, RATHER THAN MILITARY, ROUTE. AND, A REVIVAL OF JAPANESE MILITARISM IS NOT DISCARDED AS A FUTURE THREAT.

(3) THE KOREANS CLING TO THE U.S. AS THE ONLY POTENTIAL, RELIABLE EXTERNAL PROP. YET THE U.S. IS VIEWED WITH UNCERTAINTY AS U.S. AID DECREASES AND TALK OF REDUCING OUR PRESENCE INCREASES.

6. INTERNAL FACTORS

KOREA HAS GRADUATED FROM THE CLASS OF LDCS BUT IT STILL IS FAR FROM A DEVELOPED COUNTRY. IT IS BURDENED WITH THE PROBLEMS WHICH WE ARE BEGINNING TO RECOGNIZE PLAGUE THE "MIDDLE ECONOMIES" OR WHAT MAY BE CALLED "THE TRANSITIONAL SOCIETIES" FOR LACK OF CLEARER TERMINOLOGY.

A. ECONOMIC PROBLEMS: WITHOUT DEMINISHING ITS REMARKABLE ECONOMIC SECRET

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SUCCESS, ITS ECONOMY REMAINS MARGINAL, LACKING IN NATURAL RESOURCES, AND HIGHLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO EXTERNAL FORCES. ITS SUCCESS WAS BASED ON A HEAVY INFLOW OF CAPITAL; A HIGHLY EFFICIENT, LOW COST, WELL-DISCIPLINED AND DOCILE, LABOR FORCE; AND AN EXPANDING EXPORT MARKET. AS EMBTELS 7321, 7326, 7327 POINT OUT THE COMBINATION OF HIGH ENERGY AND GRAIN COSTS, AND THE CURRENT DOWNTURN IN THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY EXPOSE THE VULNERABILITY OF THE KOREAN ECONOMY AND ITS LACK OF ANY "BAD WEATHER" RESERVES. EVEN WITHOUT

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INFO AMEMBASSY TOKYO

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THIS CURRENT CRISES, IT HAS INHERENT WEAKNESSES. JUST AS IN THE CASE OF JAPAN, THE LABOR FORCE WILL NOT REMAIN FOR TOO MANY YEARS LOW COST AND PROTECTIONIST PRESSURES WILL RISE AGAINST ITS PRODUCTS. FURTHER, THE MILITARY THREAT FROM THE NORTH ADDS BOTH AN ELEMENT OF INVESTMENT RISK AND CAN BE EXPECTED TO SYPHON OFF INVESTMENT FROM THE CONOMY, AS U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE DECLINES. FINALLY, THE ROCKY STATE OF ROK/JAPAN RELATIONS COULD INHIBIT BOTH TRADE AND INVESTMENT FROM KOREA'S MOST NATURAL ECONOMIC PARTNER.

B. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL STRESSES: THE TRANSITIONAL NATURE OF KOREAN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS BEGINNING TO HAVE EVEN GREATER IMPACT ON ITS POLITICAL STABILITY. THE TIGHT, DISCIPLINED, AUSTERE STRUCTURE, CHARACTERISTIC OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL DECADE, IS NO LONGER SO READILY ACQUIESCED IN OR ENFORCEABLE. MATERIAL REWARD OR THE FEAR OF COMMUNIST AGGRESSION NO LONGER UNIFY A BURGEONING MIDDLE CLASS, A STUDENT POPULATION GROWN IMMENSELY IN A DECADE, AN EDUCATED ELITE WITH MANY INFLUENCED BY THE CHRISTIAN ETHID, AND DISSATISFIED POLITICAL ELEMENTS NOW PRESSING FOR A GREATER PIECE OF THE POLITICAL ACTION. THE CONSEQUENCE IS THE EARLY STAGES OF A NOW FAMILIAR STRUGGLE FOR POWER BETWEEN PRESIDENT PARK AND THE OFFSPRING OF HIS SUCCESS. AT PRESENT STAGE, I SEE LITTLE GROUNDS FOR COMPROMISE WITH PARK REVERTING TO PAST TECHNIQUES OF POWER MANIPULATION WHICH ARE INCREASINGLY LESS ACCEPTABLE IN A CHANGED INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT, AND WITH THE OPPOSITION EQUALLY UNCOMPROMISING - VIEWING CONCESSIONS BY PARK AS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS.

9. THE PRESSURES AGAINST THE PARK SYSTEM ARE LIKELY TO BE COM-

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POUNDED BY THE GROWING PROBLEMS FACED BY KOREA DUE TO THE NERGY

CRISIS AND THE DOWNTURN IN THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY WITH GROWING LABOR MILITANCY A NEW FACTOR TO BEAR WATCHING. THE ODDS ARE STILL HEAVILY ON PRES PARK MAINTAINING HIS POLITICAL CONTROL. HE MAINTAINS THE LOYALTIES OF THE KEY LEVERS OF POWER, THE MILITARY AND POLICE, THE BUREAUCRACY, AND BUSINESS LEADERSHIP. HIS OPPOSITION IS STILL ESSENTIALLY AN URBAN MINORITY, WITH THE COUNTRYSIDE INDIFFERENT. BUT, WHATEVER THE OUTCOME, CLEARLY THIS INTERNAL ADJUSTMENT MUST BE LEFT TO KOREANS TO RESOLVE, AND IT COULD GO THROUGH SOME PAINFUL AND EVEN BLOODY STAGES.

10. THE PITOTAL ROLE OF PRES PARK: AFTER 13 YEARS IN POWER AND ACKNOWLEDGED CONTRIBUTIONS TO HIS COUNTRY'S DEVELOPMENT, PRES PARK FACES THE FIRST MAJOR CHALLENGE TO HIS POWER. HE REMAINS CONVINCED THERE IS NO REALISTIC ALTERNATIVE TO HIS CONTINUED ROLE IN TERMS OF PROMOTING KOREA'S SECURITY AND GROWTH, AND IN FACT HAS MADE AN EFFORT TO PRECLUDE VIABLE ALTERNATIVES.

11. PARK'S RESPONSE TO OPPOSITION IS TO PRESS UNCOMPROMISINGLY FOR HIS NATIONAL OBJECTIVES, MAKING ONLY TACTICAL CONCESSIONS BUT REPRESSING ANY ELEMENTS WHICH HE CONSIDERS A THREAT TO HUS RULE. MAINTAINING HIS POWER REMAINS PARK'S HIGHEST PRIORITY AND TO THIS END HE MUST BE EXPECTED TO EMPLOY THE TOOLS OF DISCIPLINE, ORDER AND OVERLY ALARMIST WARNINGS OF THE THREAT FROM THE NORTH. HIS FRUSTRATION IS THAT FORCES SEEMINGLY BEYOND HIS CONTROL - BOTH EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL - ARE THWARTING ACHIEVEMENT OF HIS GOAL, AND HE IS NO LONGER ABLE TO EXERCISE PRECISE COMMAND AND CONTROL OVER KOREA'S PRESENT AND FUTURE.

12. PARK'S LONGER-TERM RESPONSE, THEREFORE, IS TO SEEK SELF-RELIANCE AND INDEPENDENCE FROM THESE FORCES. ONE REACTION TO THE AUG. 15 ASSASSINATION WAS TO DEMONSTRATE HIS WILLINGNESS TO BREAK WITH JAPAN BY EMPLOYING RISKY BRINKMANSHIP. WITH RESPECT TO THE U.S., THERE ARE CLEAR SIGNALS OF HIS PREPAREDNESS TO SACRIFICE OUR GRANT AND CREDIT MILITARY AID IF THE PRICE IS CONCESSIONS TO HIS INTERNAL OPPOSITION HE VIEWS AS TOO RISKY. OVER THE LONGER TERM, EMBASSY IS CONVINCED PARK IS PREPARING FOR A PHASED REDUCTION OF OUR MILITARY FORCES AND EVENTUALLY FULL U.S. MILITARY WITHDRAWAL- TO THE EXTENT OF SEEKING OTHER MILITARY SUPPLIERS AND DEVELOPING IN EARLY STAGES THE TECHNOLOGICAL BASIS FOR AN INDEPENDENT NUCLEAR DETERRENT WITHIN THE NEXT DECADE.

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13. PARK'S GOAL OF EVENTUAL SELF-RELIANCE MAY WELL BE UNREALISTIC BUT IT IS SYMPTOMATIC OF KOREA'S HISTORY, ITS INSULARITY, ITS LACK OF A REALISTIC ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT OR A STRATEGY FOR ACHIEVING TWO-KOREA ACCOMMODATION, AND OF ITS UNDERSTANDABLE URGE TO ESCAPE FROM THE INSECURITY OF DEPENDENCE ON EXTERNAL POWERS OF DUBIOUS (IN ITS PERCEPTION) RELIABILITY.

14. U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS: AT THE PRESENT TIME, US/ROK RELATIONS ARE IN GOOD SHAPE AND PRES PARK CERTAINLY HAS VOICED NO MAJOR COMPLAINTS WITH THE PERFORMANCE OF THE ADMINISTRATION. WE ARE IN A RELATIVELY SOLID POSITION AT THE UN. OUR MAJOR PROBLEMS, OUTSIDE THE LURKING SHADOW OF U.S. PUBLIC CRITICISM OF PARK'S INTERNAL CONTROLS, CENTER ON IMPLEMENTATION OF U.S. "COMMITMENTS" ON MODERNIZATION OF THE KOREAN ARMED FORCES AND PL 480 DELIVERIES. PARK IS PROBABLY RECONCILED TO SOME SHORTFALLS AND DELAYS IN BOTH PROGRAMS AND CLEARLY WILL NOT COMPROMISE FUNDAMENTALLY ON INTERNAL POLICY TO EASE CONGRESSIONAL PASSAGE OF MILITARY AID. HE DOES NOT VIEW CONTINUED U.S. TROOP PRESENCE AS THREATENED BY CONGRESSIONAL ATTITUDES.

15. NEVERTHELESS, I AM CONVINCED OUR POLICY NEEDS CAREFUL REVIEW SINCE IT EMBRACES NO BROAD STRATEGY EITHER FOR ADJUSTING TO THE TRANSITIONAL CHARACTER OF KOREA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OR FOR ACHIEVING A STABLE TWO-KOREA ACCOMMODATION IN A STABLE NORTHEAST ASIAN ENVIRONMENT, WHICH WILL HELP KOREA ACHIEVE A FULLER SENSE OF INNER SECURITY. TO THIS END, I WOULD RECOMMEND SEVERAL GUIDELINES:

A. U.S. INTERESTS: OUR POLICY SHOULD BE GEARED IN A MORE REFINED AND DIRECT MANNER TO VITAL U.S. INTERESTS WHICH ARE, IN MY VIEW, TO PREVENT A DESTABILIZING AND POTENTIALLY DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT IN KOREAN PENINSULA AND PROMOTING OUR ECONOMIC INTERESTS. BUT THE OVER-RIDING U.S. CONCERN MUST BE SECURITSUOF KOREAN PENINSULA, IN A STABLE NORTHEAST ASIAN ENVIRONMENT, AND THIS MEANS PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO THE MAINTENANCE OF DETERRENCE AND THE AVOIDANCE OF ANY ACTION WHICH WOULD FURTHER UNDERMINE THE ROK SENSE OF SECURITY.

B. U.S. PRESENCE: EVERY REDUCTION IN OUR PRESENCE, WHETHER MILITARY OR CIVILIAN, MUST BE CAREFULLY STAGED AND CLEARLY
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DISCUSSED IN ADVANCE WITH THE ROKG TO AVOID EITHER STIMULATING HOREAN ANXIETY ABOUT EVENTUAL TOTAL WITHDRAWAL OR RISKING NORTH KOREAN MISCALCULATION.

C. INTERNAL POLITICS: GIVEN POSSIBILITY OF AN INTERNAL STRUGGLE FOR POWER WITH UNCERTAIN OUTCOME, THERE IS LITTLE PROSPECT WE CAN PLAY A DECISIVE ROLE IN ITS DENOUEMENT. RECOGNIZING THE PUBLIC OPINION PROBLEMS IN THE U.S., THE MAJOR U.S. ROLE MUST STILL BE TO INSULATE ANY SUCH STRUGGLE FROM EXTERNAL EXPLOITATION BY THE NORTH BUT TO AVOID TEMPTATION FOR U.S. INVOLVEMENT. BUT THIS POSTURE WILL REQUIRE AN UNUSUAL DEGREE OF SELF-RESTRAINT FOR AMERICANS, WHO ARE STILL SOUGHT OUT BY GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION ALIKE AS ARBITER AND SAVIOR, AND MANY OF WHOSE ATTITUDES STILL REFLECT A HERITAGE OF AMERICAN PATERNALISM TOWARD KOREA.

D. U.S. ASSISTANCE: THE CRITICAL PROBLEM FACING THE KOREAN ECONOMY IS ADJUSTMENT TO THE RECESSION IN KEY WORLD MARKETS IN THE FACE OF HIGHER ENERGY AND GRAIN COSTS. A VARIETY OF MEASURES ARE RECOMMENDED IN EMBTEL 7321, BUT IN ESSENCE I WOULD URGE USG SUPPORT FOR INCREASING FLOW OF BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SHORT AND LONG-TERM CREDITS TO PREVENT A MAJOR COLLAPSE OF KOREA'S PAYMENTS POSITION. KOREA IS PREPARED FOR A MAJOR SHIFT TO MILITARY CREDIT SALES FROM GRANT AID, IF LOW CONGRESSIONAL APPROPRIATIONS SO NECESSITATE. BUT WITHOUT SUFFICIENT EXTERNAL CREDIT, BOTH THE ECONOMY AND SECURITY EFFORT ARE THREATENED.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PERSONAL OPINION, POLITICAL SITUATION, CHIEF OF STATE VISITS, BRIEFING PAPERS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 07 NOV 1974
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1974SEOUL07399
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D740319-1023
From: SEOUL
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1974/newtext/t19741162/aaaacazl.tel
Line Count: 342
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 7
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 31 JUL 2002
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <31 JUL 2002 by kelleyw0>; APPROVED <31 MAR 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: APPRAISAL OF KOREA
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, PDEV, KS, JA, KN, (SNEIDER, RICHARD)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005